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ABSTRACT

Using a language effectively involves both expressing oneself and acting upon one's surroundings. Linguistic theory has focused on the study of speech acts, but speech activity is basically pragmatic, that is, the conversational context determines the individual speech acts and not the other way around. Theorizing about the speech act independent of the situation in which it occurs ignores certain essential aspects of language use, particularly manipulatory language use. Language teaching in schools is manipulatory in that the conversations undertaken are in the form of a language game, and choice (the choice of the next speaker, topic, length of contribution, and teaching materials, for example) is given primarily to the teacher. It is possible to take classroom conversations out of their pseudo-neutral context, which ignores the conversation's essential relationship to its external conditions, and expose the manipulatory aspect of speech acts. Some techniques for doing this are to teach learners to thwart or counter the manipulatory intentions of the counterpart in conversation by using the same techniques in reverse, a kind of counter-manipulation. Students can be taught to answer questions with a counter-question or to give an evasive answer. This technique can be especially helpful to immigrants who may need to defend themselves against prying officials and news-seekers. (MSE)

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DEFENSIVE SPEECH
or
CAN WE USE SPEECH ACTS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION? *)

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Introduction: What's in a speech act?

Let me begin by telling a story. For some years now, I have had a friend who, whenever he writes something, sends a copy to me with the admonition to "have fun reading". It was only recently that I discovered the true meaning of this, at least to me, ununderstandable and even somewhat irritating formula: namely when I was confronted with its German equivalent Viel Spass beim Lesen. The latter expression is used as a sort of self-desultory excuse for being so arrogant as to believe that other people really are interested in what you write, and clearly this is what my friend, being German, wished to convey. However, what the English "translation" of this expression actually did get across was something quite different. An English native speaker, thus admonished, might reply by uttering something like: Maybe you should leave that for me to decide.

So, something went wrong here. And there are other cases, too. Thus, Americans may become irritated at Europeans wishing them a "Good appetite", whenever they start out eating. Or vice versa, Europeans may object to Americans (and other people) uttering phrases like (God) bless you (or the like) when they sneeze. I myself have been in the situation where I had to run for a quiet sneezing corner whenever I felt the urge, just to avoid our Brooklyn baby sitter's eternal blessings. Ever since, I have felt that getting your sneeze frustrated in this way is about the worst cross-cultural punishment that anybody could invent.

What, then, can we learn from these stories? They tell us something about the pragmatics of routine formulae (see Coulmas 1979), as well as about their cross-cultural untranslatability (see Schlieben-Lange and

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Weydt 1979). They also tell us something about speech acts in general. While it has been more or less universally (but implicitly) understood that we can talk about speech acts across languages, so to speak semantically, the pragmatics of speech acts present quite a different picture. From a purely semantic point of view, the main question is what people say (the propositional content of an utterance). In a pragmatic framework, the question is rather: given a particular context, given a particular culture and a particular historical background, what can these particular speakers say to fit into the picture, so to speak? In the case of the routine formula, it is clearly the context that determines the speakers' and hearers' possibilities of interaction; but even in cases where one traditionally assigns unlimited degrees of freedom to linguistic interaction, it would be wise to keep in mind the pragmatic conditions of "cause and effect". By this I mean that the "history" on an utterance is just as important as the effect it has, in determining its pragmatic content: what an utterance really expresses is a function of both the speaker's and the hearer's possibilities of expressing and understanding, in time and space. The frustration of not being able to use an obligatory routine formula (such as tack för maten in Swedish) when confronted with another cultural setting thus points up the situational character of speech acts in general.

Language teaching or linguistic education?

The concept of the situation as the locus of an utterance's pragmatic possibilities will turn out to be an important one in the following. However, before I proceed, I want to make this concept a little more precise. It is true that the situation restricts the possibilities for people's understanding each other, both historically and with respect to effective communication, as we have seen above. But on the other hand, there would be no understanding, and communication would be totally ineffective, without the situational setting in which communication takes place. Furthermore, inasmuch as communication is effective, it affects the situation itself: the only way to change a situation is to start out communicating about it. All communicational situations are thus both restrictive and expansive, both mundane and utopian. In this way the effective use of language is intimately connected with the notion of acting linguistically in a given situation: this, in fact, is what speech acts (albeit not exclusively) are all about.

In the next section, I will dwell in more detail upon the importance of the various speech acts in this connection. Here, I want to bring up the

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problem of what it means to learn a language effectively. Contrary to the more traditional view which stresses the importance of being able to produce and utter correct sentences, I would posit that using a language effectively, and hence, learning it effectively, involves at least two aspects:

(a) being able to express oneself, and

(b) acting upon one's surroundings.

While (a) has more to do with the traditional idea of language as a means of self-expression by individuals and their relationships with the World (a more descriptive aspect, with a great deal of emphasis on the idea of correctness, as can be expected), (b) expresses a belief in the power of language - and nothing wrong in that, of course, but we have to be careful both in our description of, and in our dealings with that power, since the notion has been vastly misused. One could also say that (a) emphasizes the individual's self-realization and, as such, is essentially limited as to the boundaries of its descriptive ambitions, whereas (b) implies that we are able to change our world in accordance with our ideas (as expressed in and through language), and thus emphasizes the use of language in its unlimited aspect: speech acts as a social utopia.

It is for these reasons that I prefer to call the learning of a language an education: to wit, a linguistic education. Language is not just a product, ready made, to be acquired by a new owner just like a hand-me-down piece of clothing from the racks at Sears Roebuck: language is a process, towards which and in which one is initiated, and indeed, educated for the length of one's life, but of course most intensively so during the periods when one receives formal language training. My purpose is to unveil some of the less favorable traits of this process, and to ask what we can do about them.

The important art of conversation

First, we have to find out how people actually go about using their linguistic competences in communicating with each other. I will not discuss the technical notions of linguistic vs. communicative competence, but just ask a very simple-minded question: Given the two aspects of effective language use that I mentioned in the previous section, self-expression and world-acting, how do people go about using their language? More specifically, one could ask: what linguistic means do people use to express themselves and to act upon their surroundings, and what are the typical situations in which such means are being used?

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It seems fairly obvious that the kind of linguistic activity most people are engaged in most of the time is conversation. By this I do not exclusively mean polished dialog taking place among highly educated people in very specific surroundings (such as the 18th-century literary salon) but, far more generally, informal communicative action happening whenever people meet in everyday situations. Clearly, there are everyday situations that do not depend on, or are circumscribed by, this kind of interaction: ordering one's food in a restaurant, presenting an argument in court, addressing a public meeting, or even giving instructions to a computer are all instances of communicative action by means of language. But they are not as common, in all senses of the word, as "normal" conversation: common to most people, common in time and place.

It follows logically from the above that conversation is an important part of human linguistic activity, and that the specific acts occurring in conversational situations deserve to be examined carefully, especially with regard to our overall point of view: linguistic education. However, skimming through the literature on speech acts of the past decades, one may easily get the impression that most linguists do not seem to share my view of conversation's importance as a linguistic activity. Only recently, and mainly due to impulses from outside linguistics proper, has the study of conversation come into its own (see my Preface to Coulmas 1980). In general, the study of speech acts has taken its starting point in the observation and description of certain, well-defined and narrowly circumscribed activities such as ordering, promising, judging, rather than in the study of the situations in which such activities take place, among others, or of communicative situations in general. I would maintain that there is something basically wrong in this: it is like trying to balance a triangle on its apex rather than resting it on its base. A balanced look at speech activity should reverse the perspective, and start out looking at things from the other end, viz. the situational one, and ask: What kinds of linguistic activity happen in the most common communicative situation of all, ie. conversation? And the next question will be: What has all this got to do with linguistic education?

From a more technical point of view, conversational situations naturally have a beginning as well as an end; moreover, conversations, as the word itself implies, proceed in turns, different speakers gaining and yielding the floor according to certain rules. Often, these openings and closings, as well as turn-takings, are subject to standardized procedures, conversational routines, as one might call them. Here, I do not want to dwell upon

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the outer framework of the conversational situation; let me, instead, refer to the extensive literature on this subject (e.g. Sacks and Schegloff 1973; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; Coulmas 1979; Coulmas (ed.) 1980).

As to the inner organization of conversational situations, one could ask whether speech acts occur in any significant pattern, and if yes, which. Off-hand, one could point to the fact that certain speech acts seem to be more common in "normal" conversation than others: thus, judgments, commands, and even promises are acts that are bound up with specific surroundings and hence underlie the specific conditions determining the societal character of the situation. A judge, for instance, will not normally, in the course of a dinner table conversation, produce a speech act of "judging", or even be able to pronounce a technically and legally valid judgment. Even promises that are made during casual conversation, for instance at a cocktail party, will not be considered binding.[1] And so on.

Among the more neutral (and hence more common) kinds of speech activity in conversational situations I would mention questions and answers (either as a means of getting information, or maybe as a conversational game), the statement (either about oneself, or in general, about things one has experienced; story-telling is a very common conversational practice) and, of course, the asking for, and obtaining, of social affirmation (giving and taking emotional "strokes", as it is often called; see Berne 1968). But before we set out discussing the potential value of these and other speech acts in linguistic education, we have to spend a few moments thinking about how and why speech acts <u>are</u> important in language training situations - or are they?

The insufficiencies of speech act theory in linguistic education

Apart from its theoretical postulates, speech act theory distinguishes itself by providing us with a handy taxonomy. Being able to put some order into the things people can do to each other using language is of course a useful thing, and there is nothing wrong with taxonomies as such (see Haberland and Mey 1979:218). But if you want the camel, you must also will

[1] The following extract from <u>Good as Gold</u> by Joseph Heller can serve as an illustration:
‹Gold has just had lunch with his older brother Sid - a rare occasion indeed. Sid says:›
"This was nice, kid."
"It was, Sid, and let's repeat it soon," said Gold, feeling absolutely certain they would never have lunch together again. (1979:272.)

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the hump, and the latter may well turn out to be the major obstacle in swallowing the former. The hump, of course, is the theory. While some authors readily avail themselves of the taxonomical advantages of speech act theory, fewer will be willing to subscribe to the theory itself, especially if they are trying to work inside a more or less pragmatical framework (as an instance, cf. Heltoft and Påby 1979).

Speech acting, as a human activity, is bound by the pragmatics of human acting in general. Pragmatics focuses on the conditions that determine the exercise of speech acts. By this I do not mean the abstract conditions postulated by authors such as Habermas (e.g., 1976) and often called transcendental in the philosophical sense of: without which something is epistemologically and ontologically impossible. (Note, however, that the only things philosophers rightfully can claim are impossible are those that they consider unthinkable; thus we still are in the abstract universe of notions.) Furthermore, these transcendental conditions are usually formulated in a negative, even counterfactual way: for ideal communication to happen, such and such conditions have to be met; however, they are not met, so communication is not ideal, far from it, which is what we all knew in the first place. (For a more detailed criticism of these "transcendental" conditions, see Hey 1980a.)

But what is the alternative to positing abstract, transcendental conditions for speech activity? Or, in other words, what do I mean when I say that human speech activity is determined by pragmatic, i.e. concrete, rather than abstract, conditions? As I said above, the pragmatic viewpoint is, in a way, a reversal of the traditional speech act perspective: rather than isolating a particular type of speech act from its context, we study the context, in the widest sense of the term, and ask: What kind of speech activity can fit these concrete circumstances?

To take an example. My son has borrowed my hammer and left it out in the yard, where it has been lying around in the snow for a couple of days. When I finally find it, all rusty and messy, I raise the usual stink, make the usual threats, maybe even actually put that lock on the tool-box I have been mumbling about for months now. Now, suppose my son says that he promises never to take my hammer out of the tool-box again without asking me first, how should I characterize this kind of linguistic activity on his part?

Clearly, as a father and a tool-box owner, I would prefer to take his utterance (prompted or not) as a promise. But the pragmatical aspect of the situation that I am stressing here would be more germane to an interpreta-

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tion of his speech act "promise" as: using language in order to get out of an unpleasant situation. There are other ways, of course: my son may deny that he has had anything to do with the hammer's removal from the tool-box, he may accuse his sisters of having used the hammer and not replaced it, and so on. But that is not the point. The point is, rather, that we have to do with a pragmatically defined use of language: what do I want to obtain, what can I obtain by my speech activity or, generally speaking, what are the things we can do to each other using words?

To give a satisfactory answer to this question, I would need much more space than I have at my disposal here; let me, therefore, refer the reader to what I have written elsewhere on the subject (May 1980b). In the particular context of this contribution, however, it is important to repeat that the pragmatic conditions for speech activity determine the individual speech acts, and not vice versa. Trying to describe individual speech acts, e.g . promises, without taking these conditions into account will result in quasi-universalistic characteristics of the kind that one frequently encounters in the literature on speech acts, such as an (abstract) sincerity condition, an equally abstract esrential condition, etc. (cf. Searle 1969: 60). Conversely, the indirect effect of such abstract theorizing on the concrete speech acting situation will be that certain aspect of language use remain veiled, and that a potential contribution towards unveiling of manipulatory language use is not forthcoming.

The next section will dwell more extensively on manipulation in language use, especially in the context of linguistic education.

Conversation and manipulation

I said above that most of our "normal" linguistic acting happens in conversational situations. Conversation seems for most people to be the place where all can meet, linguistically speaking: can't we all make "small talk", and why shouldn't a boss be able to discuss the weather with his foreman?

Apart from the fact that such seemingly innocent conversations may conceal manipulatory aspects in themselves (on this, see May 1980a, where I attack the notion commonly referred to as "Karlfeldt's principle", due to Allwood 1976:153, 240), I will maintain that there are a number of situations where so-called conversation is called upon to fill a manipulatory function. In particular, I have two cases in mind:

(a) the interview, and

(b) the school instruction.

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On the interview as a fake conversation, see May (1980b), especially ch. 1.2., where I argue that the conversational aspect of the interview only serves to mask its really manipulatory character: a "good" interview is not one in which information is obtained, statements are made, or even a good emotional atmosphere is created, but preferably one that makes the interviewees look like a fool or makes them say something scandalous.

As to the school scene, the subtitle of Heltoft and Påby (1979) reminds us precisely of the conversational aspect that I had in mind above: "instruction as conversation" (Danish: "undervisning som samtale"). Again, the point is that the educational situation is not, by any means, real conversation, but rather manipulatory activity, using language under the veil of the conversational situation. And since conversation is the most common and neutral linguistic activity of all, the participants in this pseudo-conversation are cut off from their normal, anti-manipulatory resources.

I will illustrate my claim by pointing to two aspects of "teaching as conversation" that highlight its manipulatory function. The first is what I will call the game aspect; the second has to do with choice and dominance.

First, then, instruction as a game. Again, let me underscore my point by quoting Heltoft and Påby (1979). Not only do they call the instructional situation a conversation (samtale), but they look at it expressly as a game, and the name of the game is Tæppen brænder ("You're getting close", a common children's game), which also is the title of their book. What happens in this game is the following: The teacher has something in mind which the pupils are supposed to guess (and reproduce). The teacher encourages the "correct" responses to his/her questions, and helps the pupils along by scattering cues all through the classroom "conversation". Getting "closer" means, for the pupils, approaching the more or less hidden goal: what the teacher may have in mind. The statements, questions, and other conversational acts that the teacher and the pupils are engaged in can be said to be not only leading but even more, and more correctly, led, i.e. steered, by the teacher's hidden manoeuvring. So, despite the subtitle, Heltoft and Påby's book provides ample evidence that teaching is not any form of real conversation, and that the corresponding speech activity should be viewed from the angle of "getting closer" and not from that of the individual speech acts (which, nertheless, is their explicitly stated frame of reference). In fact, what is most important in the classroom situation are precisely the manipulatory possibilities of this kind of pseudo-conversation: not use of language as such, but manipulation through the use of language, among other things. It is the whole scene, the whole situation, that is

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subject to being manipulated by the efficient teacher; rather than just classroom language, we should study the classroom day in its entirety.[1]

The other manipulatory aspect of the school situation that I want to comment briefly on is the matter of choice. Under this heading I want to group such things as:

- Who chooses the (next) speaker(s)?
- Who chooses the topics that are talked about in the classroom "conversation"?
- Who decides on the length of his/her own vs. others' contributions?
- Who decides on the choice of the teaching materials and so on?

As an example of the latter, consider the current varieties of textbooks in mother-tongue and foreign-language instruction. The topics brought up and used as teaching material have to do with one particular view of life: the middle class universe, where well-to-do, streamlined people live secluded lives far from the turmoil and struggles of the real world. I have looked through several of my children's textbooks in foreign-language instruction, as well as their readers in Danish: they all present the same picture, as do the texts used in teaching second languages to immigrants (on the latter, see especially May 1980b, ch. 2.2). To take a random example from the foreign-language textbooks at grade school level: Lund and Heinsen's Auf Deutsch, bitte (München: Hueber 1976) contains thirty-odd lessons that are formed partly as descriptions of events, partly as dialogs around those events. What seemingly is in the center of the people occupying the Lund/Heinsen universe is cars and money. Not only is the car a necessary prerequisite for participating in the different activities described (camping trips, witnessing accidents on the Autobahn and in the mountains, following bank robbers, etc.), but it looms also very large in people's consciousness: a lot is talked about cars and driving, different makes, prices, etc. As to the money consciousness: the people in Auf Deutsch, bitte are constantly worrying about where their money is going to come from, they are very interested in financial operations of all kinds (robbing banks, getting rewards, winning in the lotteries, doing extra jobs as film

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[1] This is an allusion to another Danish study of language use in the school (Projekt Skolesprog). When the authors published their results in a final report, they called it School Days (Hermann et al. 1979), thus marking off a certain distance from the original title of the project itself and its linguistic emphasis. For an excellent review of both of the Danish "school language" projects, see Chaudron (1980).

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dummies, helping the police, etc.).

The manipulatory aspects of this kind of "conversation" become clear when one considers that there is no possibility of a real discussion: the question why things happen is never raised, and the only thing we can talk about is that they happen, and what their foreign language equivalents may be. Rather than teaching the art of translation, these texts practise an unconscious culture transfer, where the topics are brought up descriptively only, and where the description presupposes a wholesale acceptance on the part of the students. Thus, for instance, no real questions can be asked, even supposing that controversial subjects were brought up - which, of course, is never the case. This hidden manipulation on the part of the school system and, through it, of the teacher, makes the speech activity that chracterizes this kind of "conversation" into something that is pragmatically very different from "normal" conversation. In language classes, as in other instructional situations, you do not answer questions: you guess what the teacher, or the textbook, expects you to answer. The language class is not primarily a situation of language instruction and language learning, but of reinforcing adequate social behavior through the use of language. It is from this pragmatic point of view that one should try and define the various speech activities that take place.

Speech-act based language instruction, or:

How not to manipulate in teaching

Speech acts outside and without their contexts can be dangerous, especially in the classroom, as we have seen. The reason that it is so easy to manipulate using speech acts is that the conditions of context for proper use can easily be abstracted away: what results is a seemingly "neutral" situation that becomes normative for "proper" use. What we are doing when working with this pseudo-neutral context (as in the case of class-room "conversation") is masking the true character of the pertinent speech act, veiling its pragmatic boundness to the conditions that govern both the hearers and the speakers by assigning them a place in society.

As an example, take again the speech act question. Clearly, questions are very different depending on whether they occur inside a normal conversation, an interview, or a university examination. While the interview question in many cases is a trap, the exam question is more like a Laingian "knot": when asked a question, the examinee knows that the examiner knows the answer that the latter does not know whether the former knows.

Another example is the promise. We already talked about the sincerity

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swer at all, although it looks like one (cf. above, where we discussed questions that were not real questions, despite their appearance). It seems important that people learn to protect their privacies against prying official and non-official news-seekers: the question here would be how to make a statement without being manipulated into revealing something that you do not want to reveal. Equally important is the ability to refuse: how to say "No" without really saying it (because the circumstances may be such that a "No" would entail sanctions of some kind). I am sure that all these uses of language can be taught, and that they are as useful, or even more so, than what young and old persons usually go through in language programs. One might object that such practices have nothing to do with changing the society in which we live, and I must of course admit that this objection holds far too much water for my convenience. On the other hand, there is the old saying of driving out Beelzebub with Beelzebub's help; if one does not like Scripture as an authority, here is a quote from Good as Gold, once more, which I think can serve as an illustration of what I am trying to get across, as well as of the certainly unpleasant connotations of the concept of counter-manipulation:

<The interlocutors in the following scene are Ralph Newsome, a high government official, who has promised Gold a job in the administration, and Gold himself).
"Ralph," said Gold, with skepticism predominating again over a multitude of other concerns, "do you ever really see the President?"
"Oh, yes, Bruce," Ralph answered. "Everybody sees the President."
"I mean personally. Does he see you?"
"The President sees a great deal, Bruce".
"Do you ever see him to talk to him?"
"About what?" asked Ralph.
"About anything."
"Oh, Bruce, you can't just talk to the President about anything," Ralph chided. "The President is often very busy." ...
"Well, Ralph, if you did have something of importance to discuss with the President, could you get in to talk to him?"
"About what?" Ralph asked again.
"About whatever you had that was important - no don't stop me - like war, for example."
"That's not my department," Ralph said. "That's out of my area".
"What is your area?"
"Just about everything I cover, Bruce."
"What do you cover?"
"Everything in my area, Bruce. That's my job."
Gold was struggling to keep his voice down. "I've been trying to find out, Ralph, just what your job is."
"Well, I'm glad I've been able to help," said Ralph, pumping his hand.
(Heller 1979:188-189)

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condition and its seemingly neutral, universal character. However, a "binding" promise can be something very different from culture to culture, and even inside the same language one finds vastly different interpretations of this concept (see Schlieben-Lange and Weydt 1979:271).

So, when Holtoft and Påby (1979:21) without further discussion settle for the formal speech act as the basis for their classification of language use in the classroom, I must confess that I have grave doubts: it is precisely the form of a speech act such as the question that helps veil the manipulatory aspects of its use.

For manipulation to be successful, it is important that it be not unveiled as such. The best way to thwart a person's manipulatory intentions is to reveal them. Of course this is not a sufficient condition: many people must by now know that they are being manipulated by their politicians, and still do not act; but it is certainly mandatory to know that you are being had before you can start to do anything about it.

Unfortunately, there are not, at present, many ways for the well-meaning teacher to get around the manipulatory obstacles and devices that the school system, as an extension of our society, puts in the path of teaching and learning. However, recently there has been a growing insight in the nature of these obstructions, especially in the area of adult second-language instruction. A textbook like Feridun (Augustin et al. 1977) has as its expressed aim to be non-manipulatory in the sense that it tries to make sense of West Germany's Turkish immigrants' problems by putting them into their proper context of cultural transfer, even shock: thus, it is a book of instruction "not only for Turks", as the subtitle has it. The acquisition of German should therefore not be seen as an isolated, not even maybe as the primary, goal of the "language education" classes for adult immigrants that are organized at official or semi-private levels in the Federal Republic of Germany.[1]

Another alternative might be to counter the manipulatory techniques used in school instruction situations using the same techniques in reverse. A kind of counter-manipulation, so to speak. This is where what I have called "defensive speech acts" come in. A defense against a manipulatory question may consist in an evasive answer, or an answer that is not an an-

[1] It ought to be added that such classes are the exception rather than the rule: according to Rieck and Senft (1979:97), "In 1977, special courses for only 10 000 immigrants (that corresponds to ca. 0.6 % of foreign workers) were financed by state grants."

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